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POEMS BY
Joe Safdie

Scholarship

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Scholarship
by Joe Safdie

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These poems are for my many teachers, including my wife Sara,
the life behind the words.

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Scholarship

. . . not to search for the perfect poem but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem.

—Jack Spicer, from *Admonitions*

So intimate a connection between life and art has its hazards

—Peter Green, “Introduction,” *Ovid: The Erotic Poems*

The *Story* of O

To the Memory of Edward Dorn

Then can you sing
a song of a woman
accompanied by that
your lute which this
company took to be a guitar
in their inattention.
Yes I can, but
an *Absolute* I have
here in my hand.
Ah yes, the Gunslinger exhaled
It's been a long time.

---*Gunslinger, Book I*

The Story of O

Thus he would possess her as a god possesses his creatures, whom he lays hold of in the guise of a monster or a bird, of an invisible spirit or a state of ecstasy. He did not wish to leave her. The more he surrendered her, the more he would hold her dear.

—*The Story of O*, Pauline Réage

Prepositions

The story of Orpheus
is a story of prepositions

in for with through

then

after above behind before

from induction to deduction
from drawing a line

to drawing conclusions

when here is also nowhere*

*Blanchot: "the boundless and imprudent force of his impulse, which does not demand Eurydice in her diurnal truth and her everyday charm, but in her nocturnal darkness" (*cf* Cocteau)

* * *

Three Figures (An Old Relief)

Hermes on the left, wearing
his invisible hat (which clearly
isn't working) looks somber,
cooling his wingéd heels,
laying down some law to Eurydice,
who can't believe her ears:
she has to stay in this pit forever
just because Orpheus looked back?
The lug (she's touching his shoulder
now) isn't *quick*, by any means
(wandering forlorn at her mere
disappearance into another world,
what used to be known as women's
prerogative), but he is solid, even
diverting in a way, the music . . .
"So what's in it for *me*, Herm?"
her large eyes flash con-
spiratorily, but He's the God
of messages, lady, the highest
possibility of same, and He's saying
"No way, sister, there's Other Forces
at work here" (already more
than most messages convey).
"Sex, death and art" says the
latest Rilke bio, i.e., there are
alternate readings, but none
that make Orpheus look *smart* –
of course he turns around,
his impatience pushing her
back into virginity,
a little too much in love
with his own music . . .

sorry, singer, but you got
the wrong message: it wasn't your song
that made the furies stop raging,
Sisyphus lie back on his stone.
Even in hell's ghostly shades
they remembered how it felt:
the last faint touch a lover leaves
before leaving us behind . . .

* * *

"a little too much in love
with his own music"

he'd gotten used
to the eyes closing,
bodies swaying in trance,

thought no one could resist
those melodies, sweeping
through the bloodstream,

swifter than any drug . . .
so challenged the death gods,
offered himself as well, and

the bloodless ghosts, too,
were in tears. * Triumphant,
he started back up,

but couldn't stop thinking about
the audience he'd just left,
command performance,

and looked back to see if there were
any more hangers-on . . .
someone should have told him:

you can't see the dead
by looking for them.
Soon the critics got restless,

dissing him like a pop star
whose second album sells
less than the first. They wondered

if he'd lost it, that unique sound,
that voice . . . he took to the hills,
becoming *the first of Thrace*

*to prefer young boys** . . . they
never looked back . . .

*Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 10.55, 119-121

* * *

From Induction to Deduction

deduction – a cheap substitute
when you've lost the trail
and have to imagine where
it's leading, as opposed to

induction, inducement,
he prevailed upon me
(the petition before Hades)
he made me see it his way . . .

deduction – “to trace
the course of,” to *deduce*
one's descent (Plutarch said
he only went halfway down,

then came back up
and wrote a song about it)

* * *

Or, the oar of discovery,
we were the first that ever
burst into that silent sea

Eurydice, how she falls,
silently, unredeemed, you're
rid of me now at last

Fee, the price he paid
for all of us (Ficino said
he was Jesus) or "fey"

archaic, Scottish,
fated to die, having the air
of one under a doom or spell

Ear, how we heard the word,
by ear he said, or sense merely
*the obedient daughter of music**

Red, ease, the blood spurting
from the Maenads' rocks
ewe rid a see

oar fee us
ear red ease
or fey

*Zukofsky, *Non Ti Fidor*

* * *

the *look* back (as opposed
to just hearing, or sensing)
was too aggressive – an invasion –
Hades always represented

with his face turned away* –
the disruptions
the Underworld makes
are *lacunae* –

stumbles across the cracks
of language – the dead
whisper – you can't see them –
they're not *there*

*Kerenyi: "Sacrifice to the deities of the dead was made with averted face;
no looking, only the voice was allowed in the realm of the departed."

* * *



Orpheus sings: *I got rhythm*
Who could ask for anything more?

dueling banjos with the Sirens
on the Argonauts' boat
but also a spur

to keep the oarsmen
in rhythm *martial* rhythms
(the fleece hung on a shrine

dedicated to Ares)
subdued by softer strains
Piper, pipe that song again

strum strum
Orpheus consistently sang:
there is no suggestion

that he ever really spoke –
but if he did,
*it was surely poetry.**

*Joan Erickson (Eric's wife)

* * *

Orpheus Speaks

I don't trust these animals,
yellow eyes gleaming in the dark.
They'd just as soon rip me apart.

I don't know why I turned around --
I couldn't even see her face
in the dark. The villagers say

it was love, but Aphrodite
is not my god. She knows
I serve a different master:

order, harmony. What would happen
if I stopped playing this tune?
In the dark they'd rip me apart.

The drunken sailors on the ship --
all they remembered were the birds.
Did they ever find that fleece?

I was watching the birds. Order,
harmony. The dead liked it too,
their shadows were dancing.

Drunken sailors. Animals.
Aphrodite is not my god.
I didn't even see her face.

* * *

music, there's always
 I don't want you to lose
this music everywhere,
 yourself, listen for
a man can't hear himself think
 what's not sounding
drums pounding, bodies swaying
 beneath your mind, the
music's what drove her away
 river, flowing, quiet
drumbeats, pounding,
 the musicians of death
sirens, the scream
 make the coolest sound

* * *



O's Music

how Orpheus relates to women is
he charms them
tells them they're the one
sings: *the hills are alive* . . .

they should have believed him
they thought it was *him* playing
when all he was doing
was allowing them

finally to listen
it seemed like nothing
they had ever heard before
their nervous

systems
collapsed
he was playing their death
and they called it love

* * *

Orpheus was the first magician –
he made the winds stop

Orpheus was the first poet –
he made the animals listen

Homer was not the first poet.
Homer grew up on a cedar-lined street
in Elk Grove, Illinois.
He lost his sight when his father's hunting rifle
accidentally discharged in the den.
He became popular with girls
who grew emboldened and lascivious
when they found themselves alone with him.
He listened to the tape-recorded lectures
from his professors at the university
and spliced together every third word.
"Poetry makes nothing happen" he shouted
from the podium, and all the English majors
grinned happily and tapped their feet.

Orpheus wanted nothing to do with him.
He closed his eyes
and made Homer disappear.

* * *

Orpheus tended to think
we are not ordained to die
in pools of our own blood
or narrow hospital beds –
not fated to exist with

tubes sticking out of our veins,
to live the last of our days
in abject embarrassment –
he wanted to escape
global warming, evade

weapons of mass destruction,
elude remorseful women,
tin ears, tired rhetoric . . .
Orpheus tended to think
there was a way out

* * *

Orpheus sings: *just one look*
that's all it took . . .

some stories said he
brought her back alive,
but we know about nostalgia,
that siren's call, turning

Lot's wife into salt,
Satchel warned us as well
about the past, that constant,
fretful look behind, never

to truly accept one's fortune . . .
did his music change all that,
make the animals draw close,
the birds stop their bantering?

the road from pagan to Christian
leads directly across
his broken body . . .

* * *

When Ovid makes Orpheus
the first of Thrace
to prefer young boys
it feels like an insult --
not for pederasty, but
self-absorption.* Orpheus
was a heretic in Hades, trying

to bring down the State –
later, he warbled
to rocks and trees,
the wind pausing, so as
not to upset the animals . . .
please: New Age Music,
550 B.C. "I am the son

of Earth & star-filled Heaven,
but from Heaven alone
is my house" the *Darveni Papyrus*
makes him say – a priest,
not a poet. He wasn't even
looking at *her*, but back
to the Underworld, his

real home. So a few birds
came to listen, and the lions
sunned themselves, and O felt
the melodies fall into place,
thought that open clearing
was his stage to perform on,
always singing, singing . . .

*e.g., Foucault, *Dits et écrits*. "Why should the lamp
or the house be an art object but not our life?"

Eurydice

It was a dream that you
rescued me, it was a dream,
our love . . . you never understood me,
always singing, singing,
as if a few strums from your lyre
could dissolve all the pain.
They told you it was a snake bite,

but not that my feet were bare.
I'd wanted to escape ever since
the astrologers told us
there were no exact aspects
for the day of our wedding
and the moon would be void of course.
You should have known, too,

when Hymen's torch sputtered
and he wouldn't even look us
in the eyes, but you shrugged it off
(you shrug everything off)
as if he were another groupie
who didn't understand the sound.
Who knows why you came after me?

Maybe you wanted someone else
to notice your noble tears,
someone else who'd swoon
and tremble. You were
more comfortable in the mountains
than with me – I understand
why those women were angry,

I understand why they tore you apart,
when all you gave them were those
raised eyebrows, that moony smile –
better the mad god than your
harmonizings, smoothings
around the edges . . . it's no good
to remember this now, we're stuck here,

wandering these shades forever.
Sometimes I even get a chance
to look back at you. And here's
what I see: no child, just your big eyes
and mincing steps. Are you
washing your hands again, dear?
Will you boil more vegetables tonight

or are we still fasting?
I hear that in the daylight
all they talk about now
is forgiveness. I want you to know
I don't forgive you –
no song you'll ever sing
will make me forget that fall.

* * *



like all magicians
he only used
what was common
(thus better to seduce)

he knew enough to preserve
the everyday scenes –
alabaster in the rock,
rubies in the mine –

that it was only those
quick recognitions
the audience was looking for . . .

lullabies for blind children,
soft moanings that soothed

* * *

What did things look like
after he came back up?
Wrapped in their names
like body bags, did they

gain or lose importance?
And the audience . . .
did he mock them now
for attending to his tunes?

* * *

Orpheus sings:
heal the sick
raise the dead

make the little girls
talk out of their heads
I'm the One

first the wind
shakes the grasses
and then swirls
around the animals' heads

that part's easy –
easy to move the world,
easy to change it

what's impossible
(said the Maenads)
is to stop it

* * *

Did he love her?

He loved her at their wedding

Did he love her?

He loved her in Hell

Did he love her?

He loved her on the lyre

Did he love her?

He loved her in the song

Did he love her?

He loved her in the poem

Did he love her? Did he love her?

Did he did dee diddee

* * *

*But Orpheus they sent empty away
and presented to him
an apparition only . . .
herself they would not give up
because he showed no spirit;
he was only a harp-player . . .*

*contriving how he might
enter Hades alive.*

*Plato, Symposium, 179b-180c

* * *



But there's also
the neo-Platonic reading,
the seven strings of the lyre

actually the seven planets,
his music (cosmic marriage
of lust and reason)

recapitulating
the soul's ascent
through the empyrean . . .

Orpheus sings:
Bring me a higher love

* * *

Orpheus sings: *love was just a dance away*
a warm embracing glance away

it's elemental
as Paracelsus might say
the division in our minds
between Heaven's clouds

and Earth's waters,
"in the beginning"
says one tradition –
bayresheet barah eloheem

et hashamayim vayet ha arretz –
only the way Orpheus told it
it was *Eros* that divided them,
the love that moves the sun

and other stars (Ficino said
he *was* Jesus). So just
how closely connected, then,
is poetry to liturgy,

the "aesthetic" with
the "religious" and
what's death (*what's death*)
got to do with it?

* * *

the acrid smoke of Hymen's torch
 made everyone cry
like the smog in L.A. when I was growing up

 not a good omen for marriage
 from the marriage god, especially since
the bride got snake-bit right after the ceremony

and died
 (this being poetry
 there was a recourse

Orpheus played his lyre
 tried to bring her back to the world

(a tough sell, considering that Hades
 had raped and abducted his own wife

the two of them now sitting on their thrones
 like the judges of *American Idol*
over his petty song

* * *

Orpheus Jr.

playing xylophone in first grade
I practiced my piece
 “Sweet Land of Liberty
 of Thee I sing”

later, in Los Angeles,
 I walked home from school
 singing scraps of songs

mouthng the next words
 people said
 before they said them

* * *

don't look back
to the look in her eyes
don't look back
the God of Death forbids it

don't look back
there's nothing for you there
don't look back
to what you think you remember

don't look back
her love was just a lie
don't look back
 I wish just once
 I could have felt
 I belonged to you

* * *

News Headlines

Orpheus was really Pythagoras
in drag – Thales was as far
as the pre-Socratics
should have gotten,

and correspondences have
to go too, in harmony,
heavenly harmony, etc. . . .
the celestial spheres

have run out of gas,
and along with them
Heraclitus' doctrine
“of energetic tensions,

of the pregnant correlations”
as above, so . . . above.
"Even the idea that the great deeds
and the beauty of the world

require song to praise them
is founded on the knowledge
that the individual thing is
limited, imperfect, and

in need of completion”*

*Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, 82

* * *

Top Ten Reasons Orpheus Looked Back

- 10 He wanted to embrace her impulsively, because love is blind
- 9 He was worried about her
- 8 He thought she wasn't really there
- 7 He secretly hated her
- 6 He secretly hated all women
- 5 He had fallen in love with Persephone (or Pythagoras)
- 4 He wasn't sure he had really convinced the Gods of Death
- 3 He thought he heard someone wanting to congratulate him
on a successful poetry reading
- 2 The disobeying self = the self
- 1 He wanted to know *why* he shouldn't look back . . .

* * *

Dionysus: Life-Death
(found on the bones at Olbia)
a life of intoxication

Orpheus is just literature,
a variant of the
imprisoned soul hypothesis
of the Gnostics . . .

something inside us
that wants to make poetry
through and among
the accidents of our lives

* * *

"Poets, singers"
(Orpheus was talking
to a stray maenad)

"we live in another world --
this one doesn't really matter

except for its local color
which furnishes me my images"

* * *

he *wasn't* Greek
but Thracian (what we'd now call
Bulgarian) – and even
further north,
a shaman from Siberia

This traveling through
and among worlds
wasn't really Mediterranean
but Asian (what the Trojan War
was really about)

so it's either Aphrodite
or gods with six arms
I'm so unhappy
in my marriage, he said

* * *

O's Resume

- moved rocks, trees, birds, and some animals by his song
- out-sung the Sirens on Jason's boat
- brought his wife back from Hell*
- kept singing, even after his head got cut off

*Interpretations differ.

* * *

A Sonnet on Orpheus

O thought it a tragedy that he had lost Eurydice
actually she had gone to Hades on her own
“her own title and nature”

O did not see the woman he had married

a failure of trust, responsibility
and devotion
accrues to Orpheus

she had not quit
but he quit her
as he got older, the lack of a child
pressed heavily . . .

a sentence of barrenness
Shakespeare's young patron
without benefit of poetry

* * *

three words
are reserved
only for him
poet lover failure

“stop deceiving the uneducated crowd
with empty sweetness” (*Metamorphoses* 5.308-9)
aesthetically superficial
ethically dishonest

warbling country tunes
to nobody
rocks and stones and trees
cold pastoral

* * *

why didn't the snake
that bit Eurydice
hear the music?
in the Celtic version,

Sir Orfeo, it was fairy dust
that lured her down –
just back from the dentist
first time in thirty years

for nitrous oxide
“Rocketman . . .
burning out his fuse up here alone”
lost in the stratosphere,

disembodied . . . was it
just dreaminess he offered,
his head floating
down the Hebrus,

the kind of poetry that
never made anything happen?

* * *

the Orphic cosmology
with Eros and Night
as our first parents
seemed like a plan –

it was love, after all,
that generated
his finest work

(art as petition
to change the world
not, rhapsodically,
to escape it) –

but this love then
splits heaven and earth –
lonely country tunes

made up his only repertoire –
the wound festers,
becomes the world

* * *

To what audience are these reflections addressed? Who's interested today
in the figures of ancient myth, especially one so ambivalent and shattered,
with such a long history of critical blather behind him? *You have lived too long
in a Greek and Roman antiquity . . .* only if one sees him as the poet – as *poetry* –
can speculations about his story be valuable: his triumphs, and failures, ours . . .

* * *

the only thing wrong with ambivalence
is impatience – thinking we should
settle down – poetry says not to bother

Cocteau: “What do you mean by poet?”
“To write – and not be a writer.”

* * *

Orpheus Speaks (2)

I see it now: light.
Can she? Is she still there?
I can’t even talk to her,
let alone look back . . .

how did they hear
my music below?
Strange here, nothing solid,
but nothing I don’t know . . .

the silence before a poem.
Imagine *living* like that –
invisible. Communication
between souls. That was her soul

back there, the real woman,
her body rotting above: a summons
from all-powerful Day.
Watch: the invisible appears.

A mockery. A betrayal.

* * *

stoned to death
every rock they threw
a strike against poetry
that new poetry so
foreign to their ears

“I used to be stoned
from your sweet music” . . .
O, wounded, gushing,
exemplary suicide
of the artist –

sacrifice is the only god,
everything that exists
exists to be consumed
and love is all fire

Against Romanticism (2008)

*Why should I quake? I'm not awake. Isn't it romantic?
Music in the night, a dream that can be heard. Isn't it romantic?*
—Richard Rodgers & Lorenz Hart

*the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident
of surrounding impressions*
—Percy Shelley

1

presidential primaries ten days away
Quadrantid meteors explode over Iowa's
ethanol and high fructose corn syrup
then everyone will get the fuck out of there

back to 1791, when Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*
annihilated Burke's "organic" metaphors
and his silly sympathy for Marie Antoinette,
but eight years later "liberals found they had no side

they could wholeheartedly espouse," meet the new boss,
Edwards in a Union hall, Hillary sanctimonious,
only Obama with any presence, Republicans *all*
frightening, three of them not believing in evolution,

along with the majority of their fellow citizens,
the Enlightenment falling on deaf ears, red necks . . .

“the tradition of radical Protestant Dissent . . .
 the coming of the Kingdom of God”
 i.e., we don’t need suicide bombers
 to teach *us* martyrdom, the Reign of Terror

made the revolution private, a mere
 inward concern, disrupting as well poetry’s
 more social necessities: thus, Wordsworth.
 Still, “the apocalypse is near:

each passing second brings it no nearer”*
 is light years from Huckabee’s cross in the bookshelf
 or McCain’s in the Vietnamese dust,
 the writers of the Enlightenment

were public literary activists, compared to which
 the Romantics are just sexy to coeds

**Love’s Body*, Norman O. Brown

The Birth of Christ, “what this holiday is all about,”
 says Huckabee, when actually it’s a combination
 of the pagan solstice with the real God, Consumerism,
 despite Reverend Billy’s anti-shopping crusade

(long way from Bolinas to NYC, Billy)
 so which candidate *is* for the working class,
 William Jennings Bryan *aka* Edwards or Barack Obama
 with his practiced street jive, we’ll leave out Hillary

and “Clinton-ism” though Democratic pragmatists say
 “Hey, he won,” but the short stretch of time between Tom Paine
 (buddies with Blake and Wollstonecraft) and the suspension
 of habeas corpus, “even casual words in a tavern an act of treason,”

suggest that a small up-tick in GNP won’t sustain us, no matter what
 the latest consumer confidence ratings or Reich’s *Super Capitalism* say

remember, the Romantics also brought us Malthus,
 who made war, vice, misery, and starving the poor
 seem OK (published the same year as *Lyrical Ballads*,
 the superior mind of Coleridge sacrificed

to “undemanding” verse), evangelical Christianity,
 energetic, pious, vehement, sincere (a bumper sticker
 the other day read “Born fine the first time”),
 the new moral religion, heavy on lower class depravity,

lighter on child labor – even many who cheered the end
 of the slave trade did so because they felt Napoleon
 had been sent by the Lord, angry at the Sabbath’s violation,
 and that he would disappear once that practice resumed,

Hannah More, “tireless, tiresome, with a small literary gift”
 consoles the poor, god’s creatures, and Huckabee wins Iowa . . .



Walter Benjamin wrote:

I have nothing to say, only to show
I will make off with nothing valuable
and allow myself no clever turns of phrase

only the refuse and waste
which I will not inventory
but instead allow to come into their own
in the only way possible:

I will make use of them.
This work must raise the art
of citing without quotation marks
to the highest level,

its theory most intimately linked
to that of montage.

a Siberian Tiger escapes the SF Zoo
 kills a kid, mauls two more, gets shot,
 and what immortal hand or eye
 what was a tiger doing in England anyway

it was part of the fascination with the exotic other
 pundit Brahmin bazaar juggernaut thug
 the British East India company, sacred cows,
 a prime minister, Pitt, who put Adam Smith to work

here in the colonies we're worried about Jesus Christ
 ("Christ" the honorific adjective ascribed
 to the Jewish man Jesus), but don't tell that
 to Mike Huckabee, recently spied shooting pheasant –

say what you want about Dryden, Pope and Swift
 they never wore orange jump suits and waved their guns around

Readers of the world unite –
 all you can lose is your mystery,
 the shimmering individual contact
 of your eyes with a writer's mind,

usually trumped by recession
 or the fears of it, a “stimulus package”
 now debated, lower taxes and interest rates,
 more cash flowing through the hands

of eager consumers, no mention of course
 of sensual stimulation or unlocking
 doors of perception, no one cares anymore
 how *alive* anyone is, in fact

that's a completely useless impediment
 as long as we're not spending money

People who have been robbed of their history, who have no history, who have no moral base, who are . . . interested only in shopping and who are only capable of shopping, and whose only product is shopping, are obviously going to be simple to program.

---Edward Dorn



8

You don't like saving money?

Cool extra features

Meaty cheesy

"It's in our DNA"

Zero cash on delivery

Sign your name and drive away happy

virtually anywhere in your company

it's so flexible

you can even search the internet

work without limits

rarely resulting in fainting

ask your doctor

for a limited time

call your pay-for-view provider

Nevada, South Carolina, caucus, primary,
 the end of liberal democracy
 Zizek suggests Hugo Chavez as an alternative
 just take over the State instead of

lobbing post-modern grenades,
 the candidates exchange polite praise
 but Obama's "poetry" rankles Hillary,
 who thinks imagination the patient's

worst enemy, like Sontag used to,
 "yet this time around" says a reviewer
 of her son's book, "seeing clearly led only
 to the certain knowledge that she would die" . . .

needing the idea of a fight after it's been lost:
 the Romantics, desperate for metaphor

Fox TV stages a reading of the Declaration,
Enlightenment thought at its peak;
Pinsky praised for his civic-minded poetry,
the real language of men . . .

then modern Patriots wage war
against mythical Giants,
the world made safe for commercials
the word “Super” safe for another year

Obama’s soaring rhetoric begins
to resemble Edmund Burke’s,
binding the country’s various threads
into one subordinate patchwork quilt

an advertisement for eloquence
not the eloquence itself

“By the early nineteenth century
 their era of profound hope was in eclipse . . .
 in favor of evangelical religion,
 land speculation, bargain corn whiskey,

kaleidoscopes, and the reigns of Terror,
 Bonaparte, and Pitt the Younger”*
aka romanticism, kids, brought to you
 by the Reign of Terror, then and now,

and yes, Jerry, I get it, “a challenge to closure,
 de-familiarization, alternative states of mind”**
 but all that was in another century
 when the iPhone didn’t sell for a c-note . . .

a republic lost to empire
 awash in our precious sensibilities

**Thomas Paine*, by Craig Nelson

***Poems for the Millennium, Volume 3*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Jeffery Robinson

navigating the aisles at Home Depot
is romantic, anti-depressants
are romantic, we live in
a romantic century, we've now lived

in three romantic centuries,
Byron was romantic
Sylvia Plath was romantic
John Ashbery is romantic

the painstaking and exquisite
examination of one's own life
ala Rousseau is definitely romantic
memoirs are romantic

not caring about politics is romantic
from the older form of *roman*, a novel

which means that novels are romantic
 but “creative non-fiction” is also romantic
 and poetry is always romantic
 “that imagination which is most free” (OED, 1659)

“These things are almost romantique, and yet true” (Pepys 1667)
 “Romances and novels are often writ in this mixt language, between Poetry
 and Prose: and hence it is sometimes called the Romantick Stile.” (1749)
 “In romantic music content is first and form subordinate” (1885)

“Having no real existence; imaginary; purely ideal” (obsolete)
 “A tale in verse, embodying the adventures of some hero of chivalry,
 esp. of those of the great cycles of medieval legend, and belonging
 both in matter and form to the ages of knighthood;” (OED)

The only national literature that didn’t have a romantic period
 was American, but we’ve made up for it by now . . .

"It must be exciting for you ... in some ways
romantic, in some ways, you know,
confronting danger. You're really making history,
and thanks." George Bush to the troops,

the decline of eloquence from Paine, "impudent,
obnoxious, self-absorbed, impetuous,
conceited, disputatious" unlike San Diegans,
charting the waves, going with the flow

Isn't it romantic? Music in the night,
a dream that can be heard . . .
Romance sells, moving shadows
write the oldest magic word

an IED kills three north of Baghdad
Isn't it romance?

the Reign of Terror was romantic
 Rousseau leads straight to Robespierre
 a republic lost to empire
 tres romantique

a nation of sensibility
 (invasion is romantic)
 (beheadings are romantic)
 Paine fought for Louis XVI's life

Mary Wollstonecraft cried
 for his dignity
 while on vacation with her American lover
 on the run from debt and land speculation

 who would later desert her
 and cause her to try to commit suicide

originally spelled his name P - A - I - N
accepted no royalties for *Common Sense*
scorned and ridiculed by his adopted country
after his words brought Washington through Valley Forge

the best-selling author of the 18th century
served in France's parliament after the revolution
jailed after being judged not sufficiently radical
"by turns voluble and taciturn, manic and depressive"

his bones exhumed by William Cobbett
and transferred to Liverpool
these are the times that try men's souls
these times I mean, with Obama

signing on as an advocate of faith-based initiatives
sounding more like a romantic every minute

Independence Day 2008
fireworks on the coast obscured by fog
sweet symbols in the moonlight
Jesse Helms finally dies

like Jefferson and Adams, July 4, 1827
Keats and Shelley already dead
Romanticism in full gloom
with the weird frontier killer populist Jackson

the next morning NPR does a radio piece
on Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798
(a review of "Against Romanticism"
probably some months away)

Obama sprints for the center
praise the lord and pass the faith-based initiatives

a cocktail glass leaves a perfect circle
over the review called “Emily’s Tryst”
in the *New York Times Book Review*
an exposé of her secret sexual life

rather than her poetry
Reverend Higginson a Godwin
to Emily’s Mary Wollstonecraft
because of his more active life

beyond her garden gate –
the inspiration, on occasion,
of several of her poems –
“My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun”

but the truth is he only met her twice
romanticism comes to Amherst

“the machine”
the guillotine
(the family later changed their name)
death is romantic

just ask Rilke
an ABC news poll says
91% of Americans
believe in God,

but 21% are “less certain”
(negative capability!)
God is definitely romantic
as is every religion

even atheists are romantic
worshipping at the church of rationality

the nation-state is romantic
nationalism is romantic
war is way romantic
fame is romantic

even “social programs” are romantic
the middle class can be romantic
to the poor being rich
is always romantic the rest of us

get progress not romantic
but slow soul-mates are romantic
simultaneous orgasm is romantic
I’m romantic you’re romantic too

we’re all romantic
and all equally screwed



Coda: Wayfarer Redirect

these words appeared in my address bar
as I was paying my cable bill
and seemed so impossibly poetic

that I wanted to honor them –
by “poetic” I mean that the word
“wayfarer” has literary associations

with romantic poetry (small r)
like the Anglo-Saxon poem
“The Wanderer” while the other word

is a child of the computer age
a stripped-down means of communication
one hesitates at times to call “language”

and that collision of discourses
is important to my poetics
(Word is saving “Wayfarer Redirect.docx” . . .

you bet it is)
wait, I’m getting an e-mail
“Thank you for using PayXpress

from Time Warner Cable
to manage your account!
We appreciate your business

(this e-mail message is not set up
to receive reply messages).”
i.e., don’t call us, we’ll call you

we never close we stop somewhere
waiting for you another world
in which you're not welcome

and won't wander through
and whatever else it is
it's definitely not poetic

Poetry and Autobiography

I've started chatting with a girl in one of my classes
she has a tattoo of a line of Bukowski's across her back
something like "We're judged by the way we walk through the fire"

I used to live across the street from him in Venice Beach
although I never really spoke to him
just made eye contact and nodded a few times

I was jealous because he always had beautiful young women around him
I was 23
I thought I could be a pretty good poet

I'd published a chapbook and was getting ready
to move to Boulder for graduate school
Allen was at Naropa

I was full of Ezra Pound and Norman O Brown
I was reading that tabloid poetry magazine (does it still exist?)
I had a massive crush on a beautiful older woman

who lived in the apartment next door
she worked at a famous Hollywood record company
I went to meet her at her office once, and another time

got stoned with her and some of her friends
"This is one-puff stuff" one of them said to me
she was right

I went down to the beach and lay down
not knowing that "lay" was the proper past tense of "lie"
not looking at the ocean but back up at the apartment

thinking about her and her friends
then Bukowski walked down the beach towards me
blonde girls on either side of him

who could have been his daughters but weren't
he bent his elbow onto one girl's shoulder
she didn't seem to mind

her light blue dress rose with the wind
there was a guy back then who looked a little like Hendrix
who skated down the boardwalk with an electric guitar

he always seemed pretty happy
Bukowski seemed pretty pleased with himself too
I went to the airport and caught a plane to Denver

Ovid in Exile

after some years at the height of fame in the center of the world,
he was abruptly exiled to the far reaches of the empire
on the weather-beaten shore of the Black Sea,
where, he complained bitterly, the barbarous inhabitants
couldn't even understand Latin

—David L. Pike, “Ovid,” *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*

when leaving St. Elizabeths
Pound said that Ovid
had had it worse

his last nine years
on the Black Sea coast
modern Romania not too bad

except for the Romanian part
he wrote his last poems there
Tristia and *Epistulae ex Ponto*

letters to the emperor
and his third wife
to whom he longed to return

belying his reputation
as a womanizer.
But Augustus Caesar –

Virgil's patron
and a priggish moralist
in *Antony and Cleopatra*,

HBO's *Rome*, and all other
known histories –
exiled him, blaming

his scandalous poetry
(a joke even then) –
he had just worked six years

on the *Metamorphoses*,
more tenuous
than the endlessly repeated

thesis statement
of *The Aeneid*:
“This is you, Romans!”

* * *

This study considers exile as a place of genuine suffering and
a metaphor for poetry's marginalization from the imperial city . . .
[u]nderstanding Ovid's exile as a poetic place, a literary construct
deeply informed by an actual reality

—Matthew M. McGowan, *Ovid in Exile*

I killed a woman
I lied to her
abandoned her

and as a result
have been exiled
to southern California

I'm guilty and my punishment
shows it myths arise
from ordinary events

careless remarks
offhand slights
the everyday being

taken for granted
all in the name of poetry
Omnia vincet Amor: et nos cedamus Amori.

"Love conquers all; we too must yield to Love" -- Virgil
Et mihi cedit Amor
"Love too shall yield to me" – Ovid

* * *

Virgil seems to have been homosexual, Horace liked Greek flute-girls
and mirror-lined bedrooms, Tibullus and Propertius suffered, with
articulate masochism, under demanding or indifferent mistresses.
Ovid may not have been the ideal husband, but at least he tried.

—David Green, Introduction to *The Erotic Poems*

his greatest transformation
was himself,
Roman sophisticate hurtled back

to primitive times,
Geats and Greeks
and Sarmatians,

riding down the streets
on horseback or tall bicycles
with their ever-present quivers

of poisoned arrows and surfboards
which they are not reluctant to use.
They dressed in skins,

wore their hair and beards long,
went about armed . . .
wine froze in the jar

and was served in pieces . . .
fawning notes to the emperor
composed in the same meter

as the erotic poems
that had gotten him exiled.
No longer seeking out scandal

but mocking the official line,
the author of *The Art of Love*
never wrote about it again . . .



Summer Reading (2011)

Benjamin was a model, that the act of unpacking one's library could be the very model for a form of scholarship and knowledge . . . With adrenaline and a hallucinatory focus, perhaps anything could serve as the conceptual apparatus from which to generate new ways of thinking.

—Joshua Schuster

Instead of asking billionaires to pay
any taxes whatsoever, California
is cancelling the summer semester,
so I have 84 days to read McGilchrist's
brain book, then all of Virgil and Ovid
and Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* –
is this too ambitious? I feel as if
I've underachieved in my life –
nobody reads my poems or even

knows they exist – I should probably
sign over the digital rights
to the manuscripts on my computer
so someone can publish them
after I die – wintry thoughts
in summer, “a literary construct
deeply informed by an actual reality” –
Ovid: poetic autobiography
or autobiographical poem?

* * *

I'll start with Barbara Everett's book
Poets in Their Time, smart essays
on English poets that Tom Clark
had recommended on his blog –
“the reality that the 17th century
has for us now is the creation of
the greater writers of the time,
those who were capable of translating events
into meditated and conscious experience”

one of whom, she says, was Marvell,
how he balances private and public,
the poet always at their confluence
between the past and the future,
the “Horatian Ode” (“may be
the greatest political poem in English”)
starts with somebody giving up poetry:
“The forward Youth that would appear
Must now forsake his *Muses* dear”

“The second line – itself poetry –
advocates, or at least contemplates,
an abandonment of poetry,
in a tone – *forsake* and *dear* –
which makes this seem regrettable
as well as impossible” (whew!
I might as well give up right now)
“that tacit self-judgment and self-mockery
which always destroys the garlands,

opens up the galleries, and dissolves
the drop of dew, forbidding an over-valuing
of what it has made” (how graceful is that?
what I’ve managed at my best only comes close)
“The burden of opinionating drops
from Marvell, and a different kind of thinking
takes over: the Ode is beyond *attitudes*”
sigh “I have wasted my life” on one
stupid poetic controversy or another,

hardly Milton’s Good Old Cause –
“the death of the King was also
in some sense the end of ritual, of myth . . .
The end of mythical history [is] an event
which no poet, however rational
and Protestant, can contemplate
quite without disturbance.” Day 82:
partial solar eclipse, 11 degrees Gemini,
visible only in East Asia, directly above

the Japanese nuclear power plant –
Book One of Virgil’s *Georgics* maps
Italy’s geography, with occasional hints
on how to handle astrological
influence – the Virgo New Moon
when I start teaching in August
will see Saturn oppose my sun
and then return to where it was
when I was born, which leads to

my first insight – I hate Virgil
because I'm too much like him,
channeling the heavens, surfing
the divine waves, seduced
by the Father God into thinking
there's a plan, instead of just
letting things flow, as Ovid did,
who flowed all the way to Romania
as a result, pining away for Rome

in pathetic letters while Augustus
was made a god, the eclipse moves
east, across northern latitudes –
Everett on Marvell: “the poet has
extended his politics as far back
as the Rome of Lucan and Horace,
and then further back still, to a time
when life seems to consist only
of the hunt, and the garden . . .

Charles the hunted animal
netted by Cromwell, Cromwell
the fierce falcon held on the lure
of the falconer” – Virgil: conservative,
rural, preserving tradition,
while Ovid is radical, urban,
creating a new one – he and Catullus
were basically brats, Virgil a toadie,
Horace somewhere in between,

neither public nor wholly private,
like the reserved bachelor Marvell
trying to hold it all together
before the total domination
of neo-Augustan rationality –
The Georgics channel Hesiod,
especially the *Works and Days*,
a bit too didactic, like Virgil,
but it moves along, with some nice

country imagery, praising hard work
and reverence for the Gods –
Ovid wasn't too interested
in the divine plan, his treatment
of the Orpheus myth (for example)
a lot less romantic than Virgil's –
“When Orpheus had mourned sufficiently
in the upper air, he bravely went below” –
but Virgil is a tough case, sublime

narrative skills (rushing images, high
seriousness) combined with *Lifetime*
movie-of-the-week camp, operatic,
1st century BC *sturm und drang* –
that's what the people want, I guess,
and the praise is overwhelming – Knox,
in Fagles' translation of *The Aeneid*,
calls *The Georgics* “his most perfect poem”
and Dryden called it “the best Poem

by the best Poet” – nothing like swimming
upstream on Day 81, which I dedicate
to Francesca Schiavone, Italian finalist
in the French Open – a divagation:
Why are high heels sexy? Because
they lift the ass up? Because when
worn with short shorts (as the woman
ahead of me in the Trader Joe’s line
demonstrated this afternoon)

they call attention to what’s above
those long legs? For associations
like “fuck me pumps”? Their noted
unhealthiness (bunion operations
followed by walking boots)
only adds to their *sang froid*,
the rebellious, transgressive aspect
sex will always have – just ask Ovid,
pining away in Romania . . .

around the world on Day 80,
Federer ends Djokovich’s run
as the Serb refuses to comment
on the arrest this week
of the war criminal Radich,
begging off as a sportsman
(if we accept *that* excuse,
many of my poems disappear) –
even Arthurian romance goes back

to Virgil, Britain's creation myth
a direct steal from *The Aeneid*,
valiant Romans and Britons
holding off the mongrel hordes,
Aeneas doing what Antony
should have, leave his African whore
and come home to Rome, where
there was an Empire to run,
Dido unmoved by his apologies,

"her face no more affected
than if she were immobile granite" . . .
the silent treatment, squared,
"Ovid connects the fate of Orpheus
to his own artistic purgatory . . . his books
are removed from the public libraries,
a form of silencing" – nothing nobler
than transgression against the state
(or the Olympians) even if it includes

autobiography – "In a literary work,
biographical detail is . . . selected . . .
to produce a literary effect" like the words
I just took out with ellipses, which had
interrupted the flow of the lines –
a divagation: what was it like to be
Augustus? First emperor of Rome, 27 BC,
Ovid is 16, married to his first wife,
Virgil working hard (in luxury)

to make St. Augustine cry, the next
200 years called by some the best
in human history . . . pagans had their shot
and blew it, yielding the happiness
and security of the commonwealth
to a few ignorant bands of marauders
and Christians – I’ve been reading Horace
Ars Poetica (*Epistles* II, 3, a good translation
by Burton Raffel, North Point, 1983)

and he has nice things to say about
spontaneity, an idea consigned by Romans
to the vomitorium . . . “Lock your desk /
On uncorrected lines; poems written
nine times over / Are nothing, ten
is only the beginning” like Jim Kuntzler,
predicting the end of civilization
until he gets it right: ““The legerdemain
of the Federal Reserve in shoveling money

to dominant banks has fooled
only those who exhaust their attention
on The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills,
Lady Gaga, and the NBA” – in the end,
though, Ovid’s tradition is stronger,
the individual over the state, a horror
of central control, Milton and Ed Dorn’s
fierce Protestantism, which even idiots
like Palin and Bachman suck off today –

there's no plan, Stan, we just do what we can,
we're libertarian stay out of our way
while we work or play and go build
your elitist social utopia
somewhere fucking else "social engineering"
he sneered, "of the left or the right"
Newt was just being authentic to his creed
and was immediately crucified
for deserting the plan, which laid it out,

as any plan will – instead, we could stay
nimble and flexible, rely on our wits,
sensitive to what we encounter,
Greek virtues met with astonishment
by the Roman warrior clan – Schiavone
(after everything in this poem
was set up for her) loses to Li Na of China –
it's a new world – maybe I'll make
an epic invocation after the fact,

like being misquoted and then, years later,
realizing the mistake was true after all,
journalism accurate at least twice a day,
Ovid exiled for a ten-year-old poem –
day 79, 78 rpm, 77 Sunset Strip,
but lumping Virgil in with the idealists
and Ovid with realists (Dryden? Pope?)
leaves out people like Marvell
who tried to do both – Everett: "a Marvell lyric . . .

contains more of life; of the world;
of its time; it matches the superior
and secure finesse of its forms
with a superior freedom in the elusion
of its forms.” That’s so true it’s really
not fair – so satire *doesn’t* nullify
inwardness, and Ovid isn’t just
speaking through a persona, his
“real voice” only coming through

in exile? A trip to the library yields
a translation of Erasmus’ *In Praise of Folly*
in case the comic nature of this poem
isn’t understood by future critics . . .
a review of *The Killing* this morning
says fans are disappointed and upset
about the final plot twist, in which
“Orpheus” seemed culpable but now
appears to have been framed . . .

Coda: On A British Literary Debate

What is “fantasy”?

To what extent is Grendel
a metaphor for marauding tribes
and the poem an Anglo-Saxon dream
of liberation? The Arthurian legend
started with Virgil’s *Aeneid*,

even more fictitious
than Romulus and Remus,
but it did give Rome some
cosmopolitan flair, somewhat removed
from their jackass rustic morality –
the Republic, still invoked

by followers of Ayn Rand,
lasted 500 years, until Augustus,
27 BC, Virgil changes poetry
into minor court entertainment,
Ovid discovers sex, realism
follows romance, Larkin wakes

from Uncle William’s enchantment –
“all that crap about masks
and Crazy Jane . . . it all rang
so completely unreal”
the princess awakes, Orpheus
returns from the underworld

What I Want

I want this semester to be over.
But what will that do?
There'll only be another one.
That's the trouble with wanting –
when you get what you want,
something else strolls along,
shows a little leg,
becomes indispensable.
I want there to be an end

to wanting, then. Will that mean
I'm dead? Probably, as the Buddhists say,
we're chained to earth by our desires.
So why would I want to break that chain,
put a key through the rusty lock
and emerge, re-born, spittle
dripping down my chin, like something
out of William Blake's early work?
I want to meet William Blake.

Why not? When I was 21 I took acid
for the first time and he addressed me –
"Now that you're here," he said,
"what are you going to do about it?"
I didn't know what to say,
much less what to do . . .
it'll come to me, or not,
before that chain rusts
(I've thrown away the key)

Watching Sports on TV

I'm an Oklahoma City Thunder fan
because I was born there
(Oklahoma City, not the thunder)
and because before moving
to Oklahoma City, the team
played its home games in Seattle

where I also lived, and because
one of their best players,
Russell Westbrook, attended UCLA
for a few years, as I once did,
“Westbrook with the rebound,
and they'll get another chance”

I've liked other teams at times
but now I'm paying attention
to the Oklahoma City Thunder,
trying to make autobiography
into epic, like Wordsworth –
“start writing autobiography”

sneered Barry Watten, in a poem
some years ago in defense
of language poetry, but
Byron is the model, Barry,
not Wordsworth, and “language
is the medium through which

we appraise all things, including
language itself” – I’ll cite that later,
but this morning, pulling on my socks,
I remembered a conversation
about pulling on socks
with a childhood friend,

who did it the same way I did
and I felt confident about
the way things were going,
unlike running home from his house
with the winds whipping up,
I had just seen *The Wizard of Oz*

and thought I might get transported –
the rap against Russell Westbrook
is that he shoots too much –
“Pass the damn ball!” said Barkley
in one of his staged moments
of outrage, and it’s true, the movement

of the team does sometimes pause
when he has the ball in his hands,
but I can understand that everything
depends on what he does next,
it’s like autobiography – “on or about
December 2010, human character

changed” wrote the strangely prescient
Virginia Woolf – that was when
Iain McGilchrist’s *The Master
and His Emissary* revealed the purpose
of sports poems, to generate
enlightenment at any moment

and make those moments reflective
of past cultures and the natural world,
the embodied nature of our existence,
“Westbrook . . . yes! And the foul” –
some observers might wonder
why a particular sports event

would generate any interest,
let alone poetic attention,
it has to do with Fortune,
the ancient pagan goddess
also known as Providence
in some quarters, whom she smiles on,

who forgets, some inefficient
office worker perhaps, misplacing
the file that revealed the risk
of some JP Morgan Chase loans,
the spectacular failure of which
probably *won't* bring down

world capitalism, “it’s sustainable”
say the pundits, relax, it’s just the relentless
devaluation of everything you own,
you put too much faith in idols,
the market, poems, Russell Westbrook,
clearly not ready for prime time,

throws the ball away again, OK,
I confess, I’m not actually *watching*
tonight’s playoff game, but I trust . . .
well, that didn’t work out too well,
the Oklahoma City Thunder have been
eliminated from the playoffs*

(this line can be altered as needed)
which just shows the difference
between poetry and journalism –
twice now after they've lost, tornados
have swept through Oklahoma City
live on the Weather Channel

and my *Huffington Post* updates,
destroying the lives and property
of my former neighbors, which has
caused a radical reconsideration
of the *raison d'être* of this poem,
as a few thoughts about poetics,

some autobiographical detail and
concentration on the current moment
don't seem to be what's called for
in poetry . . . but who knows, really?
When Kennedy got killed I wondered
if the Laker game that night would have

to be pre-empted, I watch sports on TV
that willfully, streams of pure heroin
coursing through my veins as
Russell Westbrook throws it away,
since my mom was a Cub Scout
den mother, since we moved

from Oklahoma City to L.A.
(then strangely innocent), sports on TV
have counted the hours with me
until first pitch, while others watch
cable news I'm tied to the sports pages,
checking box scores instead of scansion

(Vermont, Texas, Oregon, Illinois, Utah),
trying to ward off that scythe
a little longer, but poetry tells me
it won't be denied, and will bring
all autobiographies to an end – so I'm
writing this premature victory hymn

for the Oklahoma City Thunder,
and will take my answer off the air.

Saturn Return (the sequel)

*Saturn, the lord of karma, restriction, structure, old age and reaping
what we have sown. Saturn rules the past. A key period in life is the
Saturn Return (around age 29 and 58), when circumstances conspire
to make us reconsider our past and devise new structures for the future*

Prelude

they came for me when I was 60
sodden, mute tableaux
Saturn in Scorpio
OPEN TRENCH

“I took that ecstasy – will I be OK?”
wrapped in each other’s eyes
PLEASE TURN YOUR CELL PHONES TO VIBRATE
notes at the end of November

getting a manuscript together
dream elements, sea urchins
encrusted on tentative psyches
Saturn in retrograde, antithetical

one Toyota replaces another
in the Sprouts parking lot

* * *

the real ritual is metaphor
both never either-or
Saturn doesn’t send a ray down to earth
but settles in for an extended berth
“the soul’s incarnation in the material world
[w]as a descent, but one in which

the soul's endowments, brought with her
from her higher home, could only be good,
and among these innate goods the noblest
was Saturn's gift" (*Saturn and Melancholy* 157) –
"First came Saturn, down from the heights of heaven,
fleeing Jove in arms: Saturn robbed of his kingdom,

exiled. He united these wild people
scattered over the hilltops, gave them laws
and pitched on the name of Latium for the land,
since he'd lain hidden within its limits, safe and sound.
Saturn's reign was the Age of Gold, men like to say,
so peacefully, calm and kind, he ruled his subjects."

That's from *The Aeneid*, Book Eight, 376-382,
not Goya from the Prado's black room –
"In mythology, grim Saturn castrated
and overthrew his father but also devoured
his own children, for it was prophesied
that one of them would destroy him" –

daddy issues for Zeus, but he escaped
(mom helped) and the party of civilized life
begins, melancholic, sure, but castanets still rattle
at the possibility that time can be redeemed,
Titanic impulses overcome, "Tis not too late"
wrote Lord Tennyson, "to seek a newer world" . . .

I can't believe I'm as old as I am,
at the peak of my poetic powers,
and still want to see *The Three Stooges*
with actors similar to the ones
I remember from my youth – I must be
in the producers' targeted demographic,

exposed as well to ads warning
about four-hour erections,
probably because I was watching
ESPN, will the Huskies advance
to the NIT's final round? "Huskies!
Leading the Oregon Ducks by six"

There was a job in Oregon I thought
I could get, but I forgot to apply
by the due date – still, this isn't about
Alzheimer's, which my father had
and which, according to the data,
I'll get, but Huskies, Ducks, Barbauld's

"Washing-Day" for tomorrow's
Brit Lit class, the domestic muse –
"This is our house!" – the fans seem
more excited than my students,
who feel I'm too hard on them but
who also don't read the assigned work,

unaware that Virginia Woolf
killed herself after turning 59,
which anniversary is the occasion
(one of the occasions) for this poem –
and while I won't sink into the Pacific
with stones in my pocket

never never never never never
it would have been nice to have
written *something* notable by now
as I won't see a third Saturn Return,
so let's take stock, show "accountability"
(now demonstrated through numbers) –

my first chapbook in 1974 was called
Wake Up The Panthers – I was taking Greek
at UC Santa Cruz and studying with
Norman O Brown, so knew that “panther”
meant “all beast” – and my last one,
Mary Shelley’s Surfboard, was a gift

to my publishing rep today,
the titles suggest there are no beasts
in southern California, or that old men
don’t feel the beast in the blood
anymore, Jonathan Dollimore,
whose book *Radical Tragedy* calls all

hierarchies into question
(especially the Ptolemaic Spheres
with Saturn near the top)
reminds me tonight that “chaos”
shouldn’t be a universal principle,
that the particular conditions

under which its abstract name is invoked
are almost always more interesting
to consider, i.e., Greeks might default
on the Euro soon, a revolt against
centralized power, Ed (were he alive)
urging them on, what I told

my Shakespeare class last night
was a political analogue to Caliban
in *The Tempest* (Césaire, etc., but need
to re-read that Browning poem) –
next year’s survey should be based
solely on representative works

that gather the anxieties of the times
around them, *Religion and the Decline
of Magic* by Keith Thomas procured
for just such a pedagogical plan,
what's interesting about that book
is his identification of Catholics

("Papists!") with magicians,
making rational Protestants angry
because they couldn't understand
the trick, but ritual wasn't just
the wafer and the wine, Luther
got a bad rap, "his target was not

images themselves, but a return
to authenticity" Milton's politics
relevant here, the greatest
of "religious enthusiasts" later seen
by Anglican snobs as déclassé,
unwashed, Dryden (beat up by

Rochester's thugs) turned Catholic,
followed by Pope, Swift, Johnson,
leading atheists to say "to the state,
all religions are equally useful" –
the Elizabethan police state, having
assassinated Kit Marlowe, also

forced people to go to church –
"seating arrangements reflected
the social gradations . . . the rich
sat in front, the poor at the back"
i.e., *The Book of Common Prayer*,
"common" a word that won't bear

too much inspection “If a man
committed adultery, it was before
the ecclesiastical court he would come.
There he might be compelled
to undergo some humiliating form
of public penance . . . ex-communicated . . .

subjected to total civil and economic
ostracism by the community,
a punishment which reflected
the assumed identity of church and society” –
reflections on the John Edwards acquittal,
morally disgusting but not illegal,

and media moralists who speculate
what it’s like to lose a kid should really
shut the fuck up “Saturn does not deny
or diminish imagination, inspiration, . . .
or good fortune, but does demand
that these things be given structure

and meaning” “structure” said Silliman
“without the benefit of closure”
Ron was quite bald (this is a review)
and Rae really did use the words
“innovative” and “influential”
when introducing him – he’s the poet laureate

of the blogosphere, she said, and I wondered
which term was worse – “verse as in verb”
he said, describing his second life’s work,
Universe, 360 sections, salad full of rocket,
observational poetics, but I miss Tennyson’s
weakness in “In Memoriam” (discussed

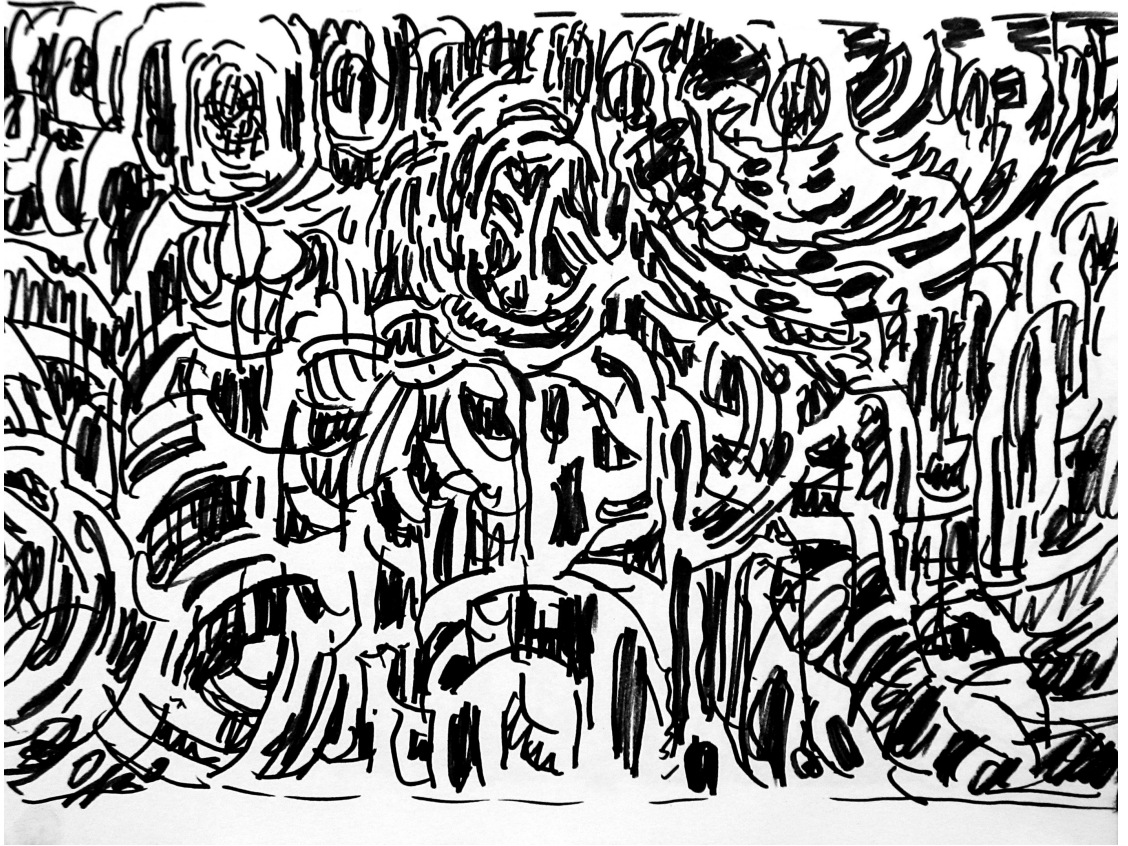
in class before Woolf) though the history
of *Poetry* magazine, Rago to Hine,
was amusing . . . “a compulsive record”
(I’ll say!), the Macbeths next week,
Giants- Phillies tonight, Cain and Cliff Lee,
I offered up my new TV package,

a gift from the new economy,
but, rebuffed, returned to Bolinas,
where a note from Larry Kearney
described his poetry workshop
in Provence, nine people maximum,
i.e., “I could teach a poetry workshop,

but you probably couldn’t afford it”
“I’ve used the same pen for 30 years”
out out damned spot “attention is all,
whether minimalist or maximalist”
the voice of God or the voiceover guy
don’t get me wrong, or do, it doesn’t

matter, “there is no competition
between true poets,” but so great
an attention to process isn’t particularly
attractive, “the Saturn to whom
the lethargic and vulgar belonged
was at the same time venerated

as the planet of high contemplation,
the star of anchorites and philosophers” (158)
noises in bed snorts and snuffs
and snores Hawthorne’s “Custom House”
working for the man died some months
before he was 60 that scholarship has sailed



Tribute to Jack Clarke

(if not otherwise identified, all quotes are from Jack Clarke's *From Feathers to Iron*)

Homophrosyne, 2010

I read a piece about Christopher Hitchens today in *Arts and Letters Daily*
by a woman who clearly wasn't impressed
earlier that afternoon, getting sunburned on the Greek island of Sifnos
I felt I had finally understood Jack Clarke
not having had the benefit of having him as a teacher
and only meeting him two or three times
this understanding has taken 23 years
and has had to proceed by fits and intellectual starts
until this afternoon, when I discovered that if I read every sentence
of *From Feathers to Iron* as if it were a line in one of his sonnets
I could in fact be said to be practicing "the liberty both of body & mind
to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination" (as Blake had it)
and while Hitchens sounds as if he'd be a good guy to get drunk with
he doesn't know shit about *homophrosyne*

* * *

“They called them gods from the fact
that they put all things in order
and possessed all laws” – Herodotus
I don’t necessarily have a poem in mind
I just wanted to note that *possessing* the law
is a little different than *obeying* the law
“once an art accepts its epic calling
to restore the cosmos to the frame of time”
see, that’s what I never understood about Jack
in real life, we have to stop at red lights
and accept the given at least some of the time
but Jack thought there was a difference
between the materials that poetry gathers
and the things of this world

* * *

The Mycenaeans were no sweethearts’ ball
Achilles just the most brutal bad-ass
of a basically uninteresting warrior clan
that didn’t need adultery as an excuse
for blood-lust Homer’s hexameters
add vivid images and a few ethical lessons
to this violent tale our sole education
until Plato invented the ideal
later the Muse came less often
no longer hiding in the everyday
needing to be summoned by odd rituals
marijuana jazz the World Cup
where Greece loses to the new world power:
Hyundai “it’s a business,” says LeBron

* * *

Crazy Love

calling love “crazy” begs the question
when, exactly, it was rational –
mind and body have a few things in common
but finally go their separate ways
like my journal and the one Paz book
I’ve always treasured *The Bow and the Lyre*
lifted from my book bag at the Piraeus Port
then dissolving or diffusing somewhere
along the over-fished Mediterranean –
foreign travelers peer intently
at bus and ferry schedules
the reason for travel: more travel
“telecommunications” says the bald man on his cell phone
as Jack quotes Paz from *The Bow and the Lyre*

* * *

all hail technocracy
the dominion of gadgets
“Are They Dumbing Us Down?”
(Steven Pinker defends them
in today’s *Herald Tribune*)
how love survives
in such an atmosphere
is a question
the reason for travel
“when familiarity
forestalls comprehension,
human society devolves
to religious culture
preoccupied by death”

* * *

Jack and Blake

“Desire can’t drive the chariot of the mind”
bummer but it’s just *chakras* again
all the energy can’t come from the groin
there must be something to self-control
or as it’s sometimes called “the mind of Zeus”
 (“relax don’t do it when you want to get to it”)
because along with desire there’s the poet
“forging forms of listening” and they combine
to serve the Higher Man, Albion
but only if the penis leaves the body
to form part of a poetic corpus
so no one’s depleted from the semen
leaving the body open to
“the ground of its occasion in time”

* * *

(did I get that right?) It’s in this way
that Jack inherits the “how to live” mantle
from Olson, seeking to link poetry
to ethical and perceptual commandments
the poem of mere being, as Wally had it
but it’s not asceticism just not image-sex
or pornography “viewed narratively
rather than momentarily, the reduplication
finally ceases” the superiority of narrative
over lyric the song of the imagination
even the most thorough colon cleansing
will keep us rooted to one place, keeping
“the irregular incursions from *elsewhere* . . .
regressive to a lost world-image”

* * *

like the 18th and 19th centuries
the memory of which “overpowers
the weaker reception of *otherness*”
still, if the Enlightenment extends
all the way to the French Revolution
Blake was as much its child
as where we usually find him
among the Romantics already 32
politics fully formed friends with Tom Paine
and Wollstonecraft writing *The French Revolution*
and *America: A Prophecy* “be not a world”
wrote Ed Dorn in an early poem
“and therefore halt before the incursions
of general infection from a stronger world”

* * *

classic 18th century thought hard to yoke
to the Romantic doctrine of world completion
but we can't just *live* a Hamlet-like delay
is necessary i.e. Blake's early
“The moment of desire!”
while certainly part of the story
can too easily become selfishness
(a battle waged in Jack's *Gloucester Sonnets*
and *The Iliad*) and therefore not conducive
to poetry which has to come from sources
outside the self as Spicer also said
still, it makes sense
to think of Jack as a Romantic
counseling concrete life

* * *

cognizant of “otherness
in each one of our acts
not excluding the most trivial”
as Paz wrote in *The Bow and the Lyre*
which is elsewhere somewhere
around the Mediterranean sea
last night I pulled *Steppenwolf* off the shelf
which I remember liking
as a selfish teenager
a good definition of poetry:
“a convocation and gravitation
of the word in a magnetic here”
Paz again and I suddenly understand
that lost book was NOT

* * *

The Bow and the Lyre but
Double Flame: Love and Eroticism
still, a few stanzas ago, it seemed
a good way to keep things going
unlike *Steppenwolf* overly burdened
by German Romanticism
Hesse should have studied
the 18th century writers instead
when love and eroticism weren’t just
markers in a mythological system
but the system itself “the news of *otherness*
not theories and speculations as to its existence”
the U.S. withdraws from world completion
the poem of the world can finally begin

* * *

A few weeks after I had sent the above sheaf of poems to Michael Boughn for his assemblage of work honoring Jack Clarke, I became unsure about whether or not I had actually written what I had wanted to say, so wrote this epilogue:

Dissatisfaction

The thing about Jack's book is that small sections or, as Blake wrote, "one thought" might contain immensities I like Whitman's "I am large, I contain multitudes" but Jack's project demands that we discover what that actually means in our lives otherwise the drama consumes itself stays "personal" never weaves the world story

for example I recently incorporated part of an Orwell essay about sports ("Sporting Spirit," published in the same collection as "Shooting An Elephant") into a long poem I'm writing this summer and soon afterwards realized I could also include part of a much earlier poem about high school basketball

not because it wasn't fine as it was but because it's what the larger poem wanted order can't waste time with disorder the World Story demands many marriages but people only need one "the poet, Novalis says, 'does not make, but makes it possible for one to make'" like the doctor's being in a position to write

so it's not just narrative but also right now "restoring time to its present moment" "It isn't until the final plate (of *Illustrations to the Book of Job*) that the instruments of creation are taken down from the Tree of Life and delivered to human hands" "all is a metaphor; there is only poetry"

the end of *Love's Body* by Norman O. Brown "a good book" said Jack at Duncan McNaughton's home in Bolinas another line of his I like is "The kingdom of God is close: every passing minute brings it no nearer" I recently read Nobby had Alzheimers at the end of his life

which makes it even more poignant that the last time I saw him giving a fabulous lecture in Berkeley on the occasion of his last book *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* in 1991 he said "I'm sorry I remember your face but not the name" we'll all eventually forget each other even my two poles

the bondage to chronological time (the 18th century, baseball, satire, politics) and apocalypse (Nobby, Blake, Jack, romantic self-annihilation) will all fade leaving not a rack behind I've just re-found Duncan McNaughton's unpublished PhD thesis *Love Triumphant* about Shakespeare's sonnets –

“a mystery which has for its matrix an unfinished love” – McNaughton writes: “Eurydice was lost or abandoned, and thence springs Orphism. Of that fact, regardless of the secrets and beauties of the doctrine, there can be no doubt. . . . for Orpheus returns alone, without his Lady . . . that is the measure in failure . . .”

I can finish this poem by quoting more of this remarkable book so I will – “Orpheus’ head was preserved singing in a sanctuary of Apollo, but the same legend tells us the head never stopped singing . . . even took to itself oracular prerogatives, at which point even Apollo

became offended enough to finally silence him.” nice 18th century zinger, Duncan! Blake’s satire *An Island in the Moon* bridges the Enlightenment and the Romantics I feel as if I’m there right now “Dionysus presides over the mysteries of the revelation of the Actual . . . a dramaturgy wherein the passaging

is itself this confrontation . . . It is the pure face of the Real, this god’s mask of the complete site of transinvestiture of the heart, the – for a man – regalia of ‘complete female surrender.’ It confounds once and for all any assumptions of sexuality; it penetrates the mystery

and exhibits itself as evidence . . . he or she who is in the ‘throes’ of this mystery’s measure suffers no release at all from the exactest limitation of the Real. This pain of ‘limit’ is itself the energy of the dance. . . In this mystery, marriage and poetry are one,

that is, nature and imagination are one.” the crowd beside itself I don’t know what Duncan will write for Boughn’s collection (I assume he’ll write something) but that’s a great final critique of *From Feathers to Iron*

Coda: Scholarship

scholarship!
is cinematic

scholarship!
needs a sponsor

you're very very small
at the tip
of its enormous white beard

a daguerrotype:
four American writers
of the 19th century
try to solve a murder

who killed
scholarship



Afterword: On *Scholarship*

Some lines in Pound's early version of *The Cantos* have always stuck with me:

say I take your whole bag of tricks,
Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the thing's an art-form,
Your *Sordello*, and that the modern world
Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in

Those are debatable propositions, of course, but this manuscript is in fact a kind of rag-bag in which I've tried to stuff a lot of things – history, myth, politics, speculations about poetry and the poetry world, autobiographical narrative, criticism, prose – while still writing “poetry.” What is poetry? I've been writing it for a long time and I have no idea.

But in this book that has so many quotes, let me offer one more, from one of its muses, Barbara Everett. In an essay about the author of *Sordello*, Robert Browning, she writes:

Post-Romantic art created for itself a “Palace of Art” as refuge from the philistinism of an emerging industrialism. But certain natural impulses and principles in Browning made that “Palace” quite as antipathetic as its alternative – perhaps rather more so. . . . To the enormously talented, well-read if self-educated Browning, poetry and the love of the arts in general seem to have come as both the possession of power and the hatred of power: as an art that opposed Art. (“Browning Versions”)

These attempts should be seen in that spirit; I hope they bring some pleasure.



Joe Safdie lives in Encinitas, a coastal community north of San Diego, teaches writing and literature at a community college, and petitions the emperor to lift his exile. (Who is the emperor? Good question.) He's published the chapbooks *Wake Up The Panthers* (with the help of Kayak Press), *Saturn Return* (Smithereens Press), *Spring Training* (Zephyr Press), *September Song* (Oasis Press), and *Mary Shelley's Surfboard* (Blue Press). Other poems, essays, reviews and opinions about literary matters are floating in the virtual universe and occasionally assume form.